

All hands on deck

Hard work in the spirit of Cesar Chavez gives Fresno kids an improved place to skate.

By Joan Obra /

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Romain Park in southeast Fresno is no longer the site of a concrete slab with some skate ramps.

A whirlwind day of painting, hammering and fastening together metal pieces has created a place for skateboarders, BMX bikers and in-line skaters to perform new tricks -- and learn about United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez.

There's now a mural depicting Chavez's core values, such as service to others and celebrating community. Signs with these values also top wooden benches.

And in a nod to Chavez's agricultural background, volunteers planted citrus trees in the community garden near the skate ramps.

The youngsters who use the park at 745 N. First St. have eagerly awaited the improvements, an organizer said.

"The last couple of days, kids have been hanging on the fence," said Caleb Marshall of KaBOOM!, a nonprofit group that helps create play areas throughout the country. "They asked when it's going to be done."

The finished project reflected suggestions that Marshall gathered earlier this year when he met with local skaters. They asked Marshall for quarter pipes, grind rails and a picnic table intended for skating on.

All those features are in place -- and they make Romain Park more appealing, said Sophany San, a junior at McLane High School who brought his skateboard to the park Saturday. The new equipment impressed him, but so did Chavez's teachings.

"When you help others," San said, "good things come to you."

The improved skate park is one of 10 volunteer projects to honor the Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning 2007, which took place Saturday.

In Del Rey, the only other selected community in Fresno County, the Boys & Girls Club playground was revamped.

Other playground projects were in Mecca, Rancho Cordova, Redlands, Salinas, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose and south Los Angeles.

The effort is led by California first lady Maria Shriver and CaliforniaVolunteers, the agency that administers programs for the Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning. KaBOOM! is their partner.

Among these projects, Romain Park is unique: It's the only skate park among the 10 areas.

And because of liability requirements, it's only one of about three skate parks tackled by KaBOOM! per year, Marshall said.

About 120 volunteers showed up to implement about \$60,000 of changes, Marshall said. Among them were brothers Fernando and Anthony Chavez, grandsons of Cesar Chavez.

Fernando Chavez said he likes to see volunteers working together, because it would have pleased his grandfather. A valuable lesson is "doing more stuff not for yourself," he said, "but for the community."

That's not the only lesson volunteers have learned about Cesar Chavez. Local organizations such as the Chicano Youth Center in Fresno received teaching materials about the leader's life.

Some of them are based upon Chavez's core values: sacrifice, acceptance of all people, a preference to help the most needy, knowledge, nonviolence, innovation, determination, and respect for life and the environment.

The lessons are an opportunity to extend Chavez's teachings to the community, said Javier Guzman, chairman of the board of the Chicano Youth Center.

Like other volunteers, Guzman took a break in the middle of the day to reflect on Chavez's teachings.

During that break, Anthony Chavez led the crowd in the farmworkers clap -- a clap with a rhythm that starts out slow, then speeds up.

"That clap has always been very fundamental to the UFW movement," Chavez said -- because it demonstrates that people can work together.